

UW

Memo: December 3, 1957

To: Prof. Gerard A. Rohlich, Chairman, The University Committee.

From: Prof. Van R. Potter, Department of Oncology.

Proposal: It is proposed that a University of Wisconsin Committee on Man's Future should be created, with the hope that it might become the prototype of a similar group at the national level after sufficient experience had been gained at the local level.

Purpose of the UW Committee: This committee should have as its function the exploration of the issues which are involved in the survival of civilized man on this planet. It has become apparent to all who have given the subject much thought that this is the paramount issue facing modern society. The basic problem of our age is to find the means by which man can adapt himself to a world that is rapidly changing under the impact of science and technology.

In a primitive society, or even in the society into which most of our older statesmen or scientists were born, the average intelligent citizen could comprehend changes in his environment without too much difficulty. However since the end of World War II changes have been so rapid that the average citizen is not even aware of what the problems are, and the most gifted statesmen and scientists are so occupied with day to day problems that few if any can devote serious thought to problems of the future. Editorials and commentaries exhort the citizens to act, but there is no organized effort to mobilize the more intelligent citizens in a way that would permit them to express their opinions effectively or to contribute their specialized knowledge to the overall problems of the day or of the future.

The problem of man's adaptation to an age of technology is one that can best be attacked by a group composed of experts in many fields. Such a group may be found in the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin. Here in an academic community will be found the opportunity as well as the talent to develop new ideas based on the widest possible interdisciplinary contacts. The solution to complex problems involving the interaction of technology and society cannot be reached by individual experts or by untrained citizens. It is appropriate for the University Faculty to recognize that it can fulfill part of its obligation to society by exerting intellectual leadership in developing and using new methods for reaching decisions in complicated areas. Here in a University community we find experts on the civilizations of the past, philosophers, engineers, and scientists who are individually devoted to the service of mankind, yet individually unable to grapple with the problems now facing society. It is urged that better methods for utilizing academic brainpower for national and world problems should be evolved.

Until the present, the utilization of the brainpower of the University for national world problems has been largely on an individual consultative basis, but it is urged that the University should assume leadership in deciding what the issues are, as well as in deciding how to approach them.

There has been much discussion about the urgency of increasing the scientific manpower in this country, but unless it can be demonstrated that within the university community the existing scientific manpower can be harnessed to work on important problems together with the manpower represented by the humanities, there is little point in increasing either.

Initial Steps to be taken Locally: The local committee should accept as its mission the role of an experimental prototype which would explore the issues and the means by which a national committee might function. In concrete terms, it would seek means by which the group method could be improved to arrive at decisions involving tremendously complex bodies of knowledge at interdisciplinary levels. Such decisions must now be made in areas where individuals are generally conceded to be incapable of arriving at correct decisions intuitively without group discussion. If this plan is put into operation it is thought that the committee might (1) look for methods for defining the areas most urgently in need of attention, (2) define areas needing attention and break complex questions into categorical questions that can be studied effectively, (3) attempt to elicit opinions from the university faculty as a means of exploring methods for carrying out such operations on a larger scale. The committee should obviously include faculty members who are qualified to discuss how group opinions have been reached in the past, but the present attempt should be based on the experimental approach and new methods should be developed if the old methods prove to be ineffective. It should be recognized at the outset that each faculty member is essentially a layman as far as the other specialties are concerned, but at the same time it may be noted that he is a highly intelligent layman, representing on the average, the upper 7 percent of the general population in terms of native intelligence.

Expansion to the National Level: It is hoped that if the local committee can develop successfully, the idea might spread to other Universities and reach the national level, culminating in concrete recommendations for legislation. What is here proposed is the formation of a national forum of scientists, philosophers and religious leaders. This forum would seek means by which the United States could best exert scientific and moral leadership for world survival, assuming that this is the only practical means for assuring our own survival.

The national committee would seek means by which the brain power of the whole community could be mobilized and led into channels of significance. It is now apparent to all that we are in a scientific and cultural race with the Soviet Union, and that we have no basis for thinking that we will emerge the winner by virtue of moral superiority alone. This race can lead to all out war through inadequate leadership here or abroad or it can lead to the "moral equivalent of war" to use the phrase coined by William James many years ago. If this country alone were to devise a method for organizing the best scientific and moral leaders in the country in a way that would lead to widespread discussion and study of important issues by qualified people, it would

unquestionably emerge as the victor in any race representing the moral equivalent of war. In addition it could provide an example which might persuade the Soviet leaders to modify their system in a way that would eliminate the danger of armed conflict, so that the survival of civilized man might be possible.

Summary: The proposal may be summarized by saying that the purpose of the idea presented is (1) to encourage the faculties of our universities to become better acquainted with their colleagues, (2) to attempt to coordinate their specialized knowledge with that of their fellow faculty members (3) to provide a channel for their interdisciplinary explorations (4) to officially recognize such interdisciplinary explorations as an appropriate function for every member of the faculty during a portion of his working day and (5) to provide a backlog of written discussion and opinion that would be available to writers, legislators and the public.

The above objectives provide a guide to the operations of the local committee. In providing a channel for the faculty expression of opinion in the areas in which science interacts most strongly with the economic, sociological, and moral problems of mankind, the committee should not be expected to speak for the university, nor should it attempt to collectivize some sort of a mass opinion from the faculty. Rather it should operate the program as a continuing discussion. It should be concerned only with framing questions and reporting from time to time the number of affirmative, negative and neutral opinions held by the faculty. Finally it should further the publication of selected statements of opinion on the affirmative or negative sides of the questions under study.